

Business and Service Telephone Conversations: An Investigation of British English, German, and Italian Encounters.

Cecilia Varcasia. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. Pp. 180.

Prior research of telephone service encounters have dealt with specific strategies used by speakers as well as their practical implications (Lee, 2011; Stokoe, 2013). Taking interactional data from three European languages, namely British English, German, and Italian, Varcasia's 2013 book, *Business and Service Telephone Conversations*, sets out to apply "pure" Conversation Analysis (CA) findings (ten Have, 2007) to analyze the various strategies used by speakers when responding to pre-request for services and requests for information during telephone service encounters. The text contributes to the research on institutional interactions and cross linguistic comparison, and also presents practical implications with regard to formal business telephone services and the training of call center professionals.

This book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the literature on the main concepts and findings of CA and Interactional Linguistics that are relevant to the discussions in the volume. Chapter 2 introduces the data set collected, as well as the methodologies used for analysis. Chapters 3 to 6, the main analysis sections, present the strategies used in telephone encounters, in order of increased structural complexity. Chapter 3 discusses minimal responses to caller requests, while chapter 4 discusses responses that are followed by an extension. The fifth chapter examines responses that are preceded by an insert expansion, and chapter 6 presents a type of call in which more talk is produced, even after the response has been provided by the receiver. Based on the analyses, chapters 7 to 9 summarize the findings and consider practical implication based on the research. The seventh chapter summarizes the various strategies used by speakers and their turn constructions, the cross-linguistic similarities and differences amongst speakers, and the grammatical configurations of response turn expansions. Chapter 8 examines the application of the findings in light of call center issues and service staff training. The final chapter discusses the institutional nature of the business and service call genre and gives directions for future research.

Chapters 1 and 2 present the theoretical framework, data, and methods of the project. The first chapter lays out the theoretical background by reviewing some important findings of CA and grammar and interaction. The author offers an account of core CA concepts such as the turn-taking system, adjacency pairs, preference organization, and conversational repair. In terms of findings on grammar and interaction, the author reviews the concepts of response tokens, discourse markers, and turn increments. The second chapter introduces the data set and methods. Interactional data from this book are taken from a larger corpus of telephone conversations in multiple European languages collected over six years. The data include service calls to hairdressers, stores, travel agents, doctors, museums, etc. For the analysis of telephone service inquiries primarily focusing on receiver's response design, CA is introduced as the analytical method. Quantitative methods were also used to observe the frequency of certain strategies in the entire corpora and to compare findings across languages.

Chapter 3 discusses the simple response format to service or information requests. This typically constitutes minimal turn units that lead to a quick close of the conversation, usually occurring in telephone inquiries regarding issues such as appointment booking or making an order. Three excerpts are included and examined, in which the receiver provides the following patterns of simple responses: 1) concise answers to the caller's questions, 2) minimal receipt tokens to caller's service requests, and 3) repetitions of minimal responses, none of which contain further expansion. Given the business nature of such encounters, one would expect that the call receivers normally provide simple responses to callers; however, it is important to note that this response format only makes up a very small percentage in the author's data, and typically occurs in special encounters, which is not representative of the responses to service encounters under investigation. The author closes the chapter by a comparison of the occurrence rates of this response format across the three languages, and states that, with an average occurrence rate of 9.2 percent in the entire corpus, the simple response format has the highest occurrence rate in the Italian service encounters, followed by the German and English.

Chapter 4 explores a structurally more complex type of response strategy, in which an extension follows the response. The author analyzes ten excerpts in this chapter and closely examines various types of extension sequences. In general, the receivers provide a response plus extension that would involve the following types: an apology for not being able to provide a certain product or service, additional information regarding further specifications of the service, alternative solutions to substitute the products in question, as well as an account for the lack of a certain service or product. When a certain service or product is not available, the receiver orients to satisfying the customer's needs, and requests to minimize any dissatisfaction; hence, more talk tends to ensue and some of the above-mentioned types of extensions appear in combinations. The author also provides a cross-linguistic comparison in which the occurrence of each extension format is tallied. Providing an account seems to be the most preferred type of extension used by receivers of the three languages, whereas apology is the least preferred. The English receivers seem to use the most combined extensions, using more than one type of extension to perform more complex actions. Conversely, German receivers never extend their turns by providing more information or apologizing, and the Italian receivers prefer a justification for their response.

In chapter 5, the author examines a type of response preceded by an insertion sequence. In this more complex format, responses are delayed because the receiver's initiation of an embedded sequence. Seven excerpts are closely examined, and several types of insertion sequences are discovered. According to the author, before giving a response, the receiver is found to perform the following: a confirmation of the request, a request for repetition of the customer's request due to prior interruption, a request for more details from the customer, a clarification request or repair initiation due to failure of understanding. Then, in the section of cross-cultural comparison, the author compares both the receiver's insertion and the response following the insertion sequence. Regarding the receiver's insertion sequence, there is a similarity across the three languages with the request for details being the most used while confirmation checks being the least used. In terms of the response following insertion, the receiver tends to provide more elaborated responses such as giving an account or offering alternative solutions than giving a simple response.

Chapter 6 tackles a phenomenon from the caller's perspective, which features the caller leading a continuation of the encounter even after a response is provided. In 15 percent of the

encounters, the callers do not simply accept the response to their original request, but tend to initiate further sequences to continue the talk. A typical format for the caller to accomplish this is by initiating a chain of question-answer sequences. With reference to cross-cultural differences, German and Italian callers employ a higher rate of solicitations for further talk than their British colleagues. The author takes a step further to compare the responses given to the callers' continued talk, and finds that British receivers respond with a question and additional information whereas German and Italian receivers provide more information.

Chapter 7 brings together the analyses of the previous chapters - the analysis of the request-response sequences in particular - and presents a summary of the quantitative analyses results. The author also discusses the syntactic configurations of the receiver's increments of response. It is observed that syntactically independent increments, both in same-turns and other-turns, account for more than half of the calls, which means that speakers often expand their responses using independent clauses in subsequent turns.

The author discusses in Chapter 8 some practical implications for the training of business personnel or call center operators. Previous analyses highlight the interactional competencies required of the operators and staff. This chapter outlines some potential practices, which include active listening to better understand customer needs, employing various communication styles to better adapt to customer personalities and expectations and establishing standardization to facilitate efficient communication with customers. Incorporating results from prior interviews of service professionals, this chapter also offers training suggestions from specific aspects such as tone of receiver's voice, use of apologizing in receiver talk, and the demonstration of understanding the caller's needs.

Finally, Chapter 9 addresses telephone service encounters as a particular genre of institutional talk. Different from findings from previous research, it is suggested that speakers do not always orient to brevity in such service phone calls, but rather refer to more complex sequences and strategies in order to better serve the customers' needs and requests. This chapter also discusses a few methodological implications for future research, including combining the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in CA studies, accurate definitions of analytical concepts as well as comparing distinct types of service encounters and talk-in-action in different languages.

The strength of the study in *Business and Service Telephone Conversations* lies in the fact that the author analyzes data using both CA and quantitative methods. While CA enables in-depth analysis of the service encounters, quantitative methods allow for a more comprehensive view of the data as well as cross-cultural comparisons. Another strength of this volume is that it contributes to the research of applied CA. The practical implications are based on findings of naturally occurring data; hence it offers specific and sound suggestions to the training of call center and business service professionals. In sum, this text would be of great interest and use to students, researchers, and practitioners working in the field of CA and communication, and those looking into business service interactions and institutional talk.

DI YU

Teachers College, Columbia University

REFERENCES

- Lee, S. H. (2011). Managing nongranteeing of customers' requests in commercial service encounters. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 44(2), 109-134.
- Stokoe, E. (2013). The (in)authenticity of simulated talk: comparing role-played and actual interaction and the implications for communication training. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 46(2), 165-185.